

Week Ending Friday, March 19, 1999

**Remarks at a Reception for
Representative Max Sandlin
in Texarkana, Texas**

March 12, 1999

The President. Thank you very much. Thank you. You know, I told Leslie, I said, "Max is doing so well I don't need to say anything." [Laughter] "If I say anything now, it's going to be an anticlimax." [Laughter] He had me halfway believing that stuff by the time he got through. [Laughter].

Let me say to all of you, I am delighted to see such a large crowd. I'm sorry, apparently some people had to be turned away; I wish I could have seen them as well. I thank you for coming. I thank you for coming to see me and for coming to support your Congressman. I want to thank Mr. Mayor, thank you for making me feel so welcome. And I thank the whole committee that was involved in this, my longtime friend Judge Ed Miller. Thank you, Judge—Molly Beth Malcolm, and Willie Ray and all the others who are here on the host committee.

I want to thank my friend of many years, once my law student, John Rafaelli, who has got a lot more money than I do and is putting us up in this beautiful hotel now. I thank him for that.

Let me say just a couple of words. You know, I came today for two reasons. I came here to help Max, and I also went home to Hope to dedicate the birthplace that the local foundation there set up. They restored the old home that I lived in from the time I was born until I was 4 years old. And it was an interesting day. You know, it was cold and rainy, and the wind was blowing. I said, "You know, I always got humbled when I came home, but this was the worst." I mean, for 5 years I've been trying to convince the American people that this global warming was for real. [Laughter] And we have the coldest March day in 100 years in Hope. I

don't know how much ground I lost today on that. [Laughter]

But as you might imagine, it was a very emotional day. A lot of my—my brother and his wife and my wonderful young nephew came in from California. My stepfather was there; a lot of my kinfolks from all over southwest Arkansas and from Texas came in on my mother's and my father's side of the family. And last night, when I was coming back from a remarkable trip I had to Central America to see the victims of the hurricanes there and the associated disasters and to reaffirm the partnership that we have for the future, I sat and tried to write down a few things that I wanted to say. And I had, surprisingly, since I was 4 when I moved out of that place, a lot of memories still of that wonderful old house.

And it occurred to me that in that little town where I was born and where I spent so much time in the intervening years, when I was a kid, nearly 50 years ago, there were two things that we were raised to believe in that town that I have tried to bring to this country and that I have tried to get every child in this country to believe: One is to be optimistic, to believe that you can create a life for yourself and live out your dreams; the other is to have a sense of belonging, to believe that we are part of one community in our towns, in our States, in our country, and increasingly with like-minded people all around the world, that we belong, and that because we belong we have a responsibility not only to ourselves and our loved ones but to others, and that the better our neighbors do, the better we'll do.

I've tried to convince every child in this country that both those things are true. And the evidence is I may have done better out in the country than I have in Washington, DC—[laughter]—but making the effort has been a joy for me.

I can say without any hesitation that much of the good things that have happened I was

a part of but certainly not solely responsible for. Many of the things which Max talked about could not have been achieved if I hadn't had strong allies in the United States Congress.

And I came here for him today not simply because he is a member of my party but because we share the same values, the same convictions, the same vision for the future of the country, because he fights for you up there, because he—and he does it, I think, in three ways. Number one, on issues that are specific to this district, he speaks to me about them. Number two, he believes in things that are good for America that will have a special impact here—our efforts to lower class sizes in the early grades, our efforts to open the doors of college to all people with the tax credits and the student loans the other initiatives to the administration. He believes that we ought to have a Patient's Bill of Rights to protect the quality of health care for people in managed care programs throughout the country. And I do, too. [Laughter] He believes in the proposal I made to save Social Security and Medicare before we spend the surplus, and I want to talk about that a little in a minute. And finally, in this last year, even though he is a very junior Member of the United States House of Representatives, he was one of the most serious, substantive, thoughtful, and effective advocates, asking all the Members of Congress to read the Constitution, read the history, and uphold their oath to protect the kind of Government that we have preserved in this country for over 220 years. For all those reasons, you should be very, very proud of your Congressman, who is a remarkable person.

Now, I'm having a great time. You know, I can now go around, and I can go to fund-raisers like this, and none of them are for me. [Laughter] And I love that. I love the idea that if I can stay healthy, I can spend quite a few years trying to give back to this political system and to candidates and to people that I believe in who have given me so much.

I want you to know that in the 2 years I have left, what I'm going to try to do is to take advantage of the good times we have now and the optimism and the self-con-

fidence we have to ask the American people to look at the big, unmet challenges this country still has ahead of us when we start this new century.

You know, when I ran for President in 1991 and 1992, we had to get the country working again—literally, working. The unemployment rate was too high, real wages for working people hadn't gone up in 20 years. The crime rate was going up. The welfare rolls were exploding. We had increasing social tensions between people of different racial and religious groups, manifested in civil disturbances in some of our cities. And it seemed to me that we clearly had to stop doing the same things we've been doing for the last dozen years and take a different course. And we did, and the results have been good, and Max talked about them.

But now we have to say, "Well, so now what?" Should we just sort of, like being at school, should we call a recess and just say, "Gee, we feel good. We're going to go out and play a while?" I think that would be a big mistake. I think it would be a big mistake for several reasons. Number one, we've still got some unaddressed problems. Number two, there are big challenges looming ahead of us that are not right in front of us now. Number three, the world is changing very, very fast, and people get punished for sitting on their laurels. You don't hire people to be Presidents, Senators, Members of Congress, Governors, mayors, hold other positions of responsibility, to go around and smile and say how great things are.

I never will forget one time in 1990 I was trying to decide whether to run for Governor again in Arkansas, and I had been Governor 4 times, and I had served 10 years. And I used to have Governor's Day at the State Fair, and I'd just sit out there in a little booth and anybody that wanted to come by could come by and talk. And this old boy in overalls came up to me, looked to be about 70 years old, and he said, "Bill, are you going to run for Governor again?" And I said, "I don't know. If I do, will you vote for me?" He said, "I guess so. I always have." "Well," I said, "aren't you sick of me after all these years?" He said, "No, but everybody else I know is." [Laughter] And I said—it's a true story. And I said, "Well"—and I was sort of

hurt, you know. I said, "Well, don't you think I've done a good job?" He said, "Yes, but you also drew a paycheck every 2 weeks, didn't you?" He said, "That's what we hired you to do. What I want to know is what you're going to do tomorrow." Interesting point. Smart guy. Smart man.

And so while it's important to take our time to do what I did today—to honor our past, to water our roots, to cherish the ties that bind—it's also important to realize that the fundamental obligation of life is to make the most of today and tomorrow. And to always be thinking ahead.

Now, let me tell you about this Social Security issue, for example. Here are the big challenges I think we face, and there are more, but I'll just say a few. Number one, we've got to figure out how to keep this economy going because it's beginning to work for people. I mean, average people are finally beginning to get pay raises, with inflation under control, and we're beginning to get jobs to people who haven't been able to get jobs. So we've got to keep the economy going, and we've got to bring opportunity to people who haven't had it.

There are still urban areas, there are still small towns, there are still rural areas, there are still Indian reservations where you couldn't prove it by the people who live there that we've got 18 million new jobs. And we've got to figure out—one of the reasons I went to Central America, one of the reasons I travel around all over the world is, a bunch of our growth comes from our ability to sell what we make to other people, and if half the world is in a recession as they are today, it's hard.

I'm telling you, we've got a lot of farmers in terrible shape—terrible shape. Record low prices for commodities, but partly because we've been selling a ton of stuff to Asia and a lot of stuff to Latin America, and they can't buy, in the case of Latin America, as much as they did, and in some cases in Asia they can't buy anything they were buying before because of the economic problems. So I want to deal with that.

Now, the second problem we've got is the aging of America. Now, the older I get the more I see that as a high-class problem. [Laughter] But the truth is, the average age

in America today is over 76 years. If you're in this audience tonight and you're over 60 years old, if you're still in pretty good shape, you have a life expectancy of 80 or more.

Audience member. I hope so.

The President. Yeah. [Laughter] That's right.

So it's a high-class problem. This is the kind of problem every society wants. Wouldn't it be terrible if our friends—and I say that in a serious way—our friends in Russia who are struggling to make their democracy stay alive and get their economy going again, because they've had such terrible economic problems, because their health care system has been in terrible disrepair, their life expectancy is going down. They don't have a Social Security problem. You wouldn't like it. This is a high-class problem, okay? So let's just—we have a challenge to Social Security and Medicare because we're going to have twice as many people over 65 in 30 years as we've got today. But it is as a result of the hard work of the American people, of our economic success, of better health care habits by ordinary citizens, and of stunning advances in medical science.

Nonetheless, we've got to deal with it. In about 30 years, there will only be about two people working for every one person drawing Social Security. In 10 years, if we don't do something, Medicare is going to run out of money. And there are a lot of people who wouldn't have the life they have today if Medicare weren't in good shape. So the aging of America is a big challenge.

We've got the economy. We've got the aging of America. The third thing we have to realize is that for the future, more and more people are going to work and have children, and we have a big stake in seeing them do well at both jobs. If we have to choose, if parents have to choose between succeeding at home and succeeding at work, we're in trouble, because the most important job of any society is raising children well—ever—and because if people are sick at heart worrying about their kids when they're at work, they're not going to be very effective on the job.

So we have to do more in that regard to help people with quality child care, to get them some time off without losing their job

if the kids are sick or they've got sick parents or other problems—we have to do this to make sure we do continue to raise the minimum wage where it's appropriate, so people who work 40 hours a week and are doing the right thing and paying their taxes, they're not still living in poverty. These things are important.

The fourth thing we have to do is to make sure we give all our kids a world-class education. We now have the most diverse student population in history. At this little grade school in Hope, Arkansas, just up the road, named for me, there are 27 immigrant children in that little school—27 in Hope, Arkansas. In the school district across the Potomac River from Washington, DC, we now have people—listen to this—from 180 different national, racial, and ethnic groups. I went out to a school the other day, not very far from Washington, where the principal was elated to have me there talking to the students and all their parents, and the only thing that made her sad was we weren't able to arrange for a consecutive translation of my remarks, first in Spanish and second in Arabic.

Now, this is a good deal in a global society if, but only if, you can educate every child to world-class standards. I'm not trying to tell the Texarkana school district how to run their business, but I know we need more teachers. I know we need after-school and summer school programs so kids can learn instead of just passing them whether they learn or not. I know that. So the education of our children is important.

And the fifth thing we have to do is, we've got to commit ourselves to live in the world of the 21st century, which means we have to deal with environmental challenges like climate change. It means that we can't run away from our responsibilities to try to be a force for peace, whether it's in Europe or Latin America or Northern Ireland or you name it—the efforts I've made in the Middle East. It's all in our interest.

It means that we have to stand up against terrorism and chemical and biological weapons and all these things that most people would rather not think about. My first National Security Adviser, Tony Lake, used to tell me that the most important thing a President could do to protect the security of the

country was to have a lot of dogs that don't bark. In other words, for me to be able to go to Texarkana and tell you I'm working on a biological weapons issue, and you're not quite sure what I'm talking about because the dog has never barked.

But the President needs to keep those dogs at bay. So what I've tried to do and what I tried to do in the State of the Union Address, what I try to do in my conversations with Members of Congress like Max, is to say, "Look, we've got these big issues out there, and if we can take care of them, we're going to be all right."

I just want you to think about one—I'll just give you one example, though. We do have a surplus that is very strong. Now, you know when the economy is good, you have more surplus because you've got more people working and fewer people spending government money and more people paying taxes. And then if the economy goes down, then you may run a little deficit because you've got fewer people paying taxes and more people on welfare and taking government assistance.

But what happened to us for the first time in the 1980's was we made a decision to run a big deficit every year. And for 12 years we quadrupled the debt of the country, and we had high interest rates, and wages wouldn't go up. You all remember. And then when the economy went down, we couldn't spend our way out of it. We just got stuck in high unemployment. So I wanted to balance the budget so we wouldn't have to worry about that, so we could keep interest rates down.

Now I'm asking the American people to help me do something that may be hard for a lot of people to do. I think we ought to take about three-quarters of this surplus we've got and save it to do two things. We should save it in the next few years and save it in the following way: We should be buying back the public debt—in other words, pay our debt down—and as we do it, in effect, give a certificate of obligation for that money to Social Security and Medicare for 15 years, after which the Congress can do whatever they want to about it.

But let me tell you what will happen. If you do that we can help to solve the Social

Security problem. We can make Social Security solvent until 2050 or beyond; we can make Medicare solvent until 2020. We still ought to make some other changes in it, but we can do those things. We can keep interest rates down. That means more business loans, more jobs, lower car payments, lower mortgage payments, lower credit card payments, lower college loan interest rates, paying the debt down. It means that—you know what Max has to do every year when he votes on a budget? The first thing he's got to do this year is to take over 13 cents of every dollar you pay in taxes and put it to the side to pay interest on the debt we've run up.

So when you think about what we're spending money on and you say, "Well, Max, I want more for education," or, "Max, I want a tax cut," or, "Max, I want you to spend more money on building us some more highways here"—just keep in mind, you're thinking, "Well, I'm giving him \$100, right, in taxes." Well, you're not. You're giving him \$87 in taxes because you've got to take 13 off the top just to pay interest on the debt we've run up.

Now, if we do what I'm suggesting, not only can we deal with the financial crisis in Social Security and Medicare, 15 years from now—and, again, it won't be me, I won't be there—but 15 years from now the Members of Congress will only be taking 2 cents on the dollar for interest on the debt. They'll be spending the money on Social Security, Medicare, education, investing in a peaceful world, giving you tax cuts, whatever. But don't you think it makes sense for us to take care of the Social Security and Medicare problems and to pay the debt down and to secure our economic strength? I mean, I think it makes a lot of sense.

So I came here today to help a man I admire. I came here today to thank you for sticking with me and for giving me the chance to serve and giving the country the chance to have these good things happen. And I'd like to make just a whoop-de-do speech. But I owe it to you to tell you that this new century will present us with unparalleled new opportunities and unforeseen new challenges. And our predecessors, the people that were here 5 years ago and 10 years ago and 15 years ago were up to their ears in

alligators. They did not have the opportunity that we have to take the confidence, the economic success, the things we've got now, and think about the long-term welfare of the country.

And if you believe what I said when I started and you clapped—50 years ago I was raised to believe that everybody could live out their dreams, but that we had responsibilities to one another to live in one community—then let's act like that now and give those gifts to our children.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:20 p.m. in the Stephen F. Austin Ballroom at the Four Points Hotel Sheraton. In his remarks, he referred to Leslie Sandlin, wife of Representative Sandlin; Mayor John M. Garvis of Texarkana; event cohosts former Bowie County Judge Edward Miller, Texas Democratic Party Chair Molly Beth Malcolm, and Texarkana City Council member Willie Ray; John D. Rafaelli, owner, Four Points Hotel Sheraton; the President's brother, Roger Clinton, and his wife, Molly, and their son, Tyler; and the President's stepfather Richard Kelley. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Statement on the Accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic as Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization March 12, 1999

I welcome the accession today of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic as NATO's newest members. The people of these three nations know what it means to lose their freedom. For years they struggled with dignity and courage to regain their freedom. And now they will help us defend it for many years to come. Their membership will make America safer. It will make NATO stronger. And it will help us realize our common vision of a Europe that is for the first time undivided, democratic, and at peace.

For 3 days, beginning on April 23, NATO's 19 members will meet in Washington for the 50th anniversary summit of our alliance, joined by our partners from across the new Europe. We will honor NATO's achievements in protecting peace and security. We will also prepare our alliance to meet the